



After the Baby:

Easing Your Return To Work

The end of your maternity leave begins a new stage of motherhood. Here's how to handle the emotional and practical challenges ahead.

If you ever needed to respect your true feelings, the end of your maternity leave is the time, because going back to work after the birth of a baby is a highly emotional experience. Accepting your feelings, which may range from intense sadness to an anticipatory thrill, may be frustrating, especially when your emotions conflict.

To squelch fears about separating from your child, you probably have made a perfectly logical case for going back to work – but deep down inside you don't believe a word of it. No matter how much your mind tells you not to feel guilty, your heart still does. This conflict can cause great anxiety, which could result in sleeplessness, eating disorders, or personal difficulties with your husband and family. If this

sounds familiar, realize now that you cannot easily resolve this conflict. Don't look for your heart and mind to harmonize in this matter. They can't; they are both right.

Your heart aches because you feel you are going to lose your baby – and you are, but only for a certain number of hours each day. Your mind knows that your baby will be well cared for in your absence, but this can't alleviate the feeling of loss. The only way to get over the loss is to let yourself grieve for it.

In the same way you may someday need to acknowledge your grief when you give up breastfeeding, when you put your child on the school bus for the first time, when you watch her graduate from high school, and when you watch

her walk down the aisle and get married. Each of these changes causes joy and sadness, is simultaneously a gain and a loss – the double-edged emotions of parenthood that we all learn to handle and even embrace. Such change makes us keenly aware of life and how much we love it.

Worry – to a point.

Worry is also natural when you leave your baby. Even if you've made first-rate childcare arrangements, you may feel worse than ever as the reality of leaving your baby with someone else sinks in. You may worry that you won't be able to continue breastfeeding, that your baby will love your caregiver more than she loves you, and that, no matter how fine your caregiver is,



Some thoughtful preparation before you return to your job, such as introducing a bottle, can help smooth the transition for you and your baby.

she may not provide the best care for your baby.

“Our nanny had great references; still, the thought of leaving my baby with a stranger drove me crazy,” says Donna, an ophthalmologist.

These fears are natural for any mother who leaves her baby for the first time, whether it’s for one hour or a whole day. Eventually, as you adjust to the routine of leaving your child in someone else’s care, these fears will subside, and hopefully you will grow to trust your caregiver.

Relatives and friends may worry, too, and share their thoughts with you whether or not you want to hear them. “My mom made going back to work a little hard on me,” recalls Jane, a biologist. “She would listen to my guilt feelings and then, instead of telling me she understood, wonder out loud why I was doing it. She couldn’t understand that we needed my income, because she had never experienced such a need.”

“My mother-in-law kept expressing her fears about daycare,” says Frances, a paralegal. “She kept telling me these horrible sexual abuse stories she’d

heard about on TV. It got me so I couldn’t stop thinking about it.”

Don’t let other people’s worries overly affect you. Realize that, just like you, those close to you are going to have positive and negative feelings about your returning to work. Be strategic. Talk about your return with people who support you; avoid or politely ignore those who don’t. Have a few answers ready for those times when a doubter makes you feel as if you’re a backed into a corner.

Doubter: “Nobody cares about your baby as much as you do.”

You: “That’s true. Isn’t my baby lucky? She has both a mother’s love and a loving caregiver.”

Doubter: “I just don’t see why you’re going ahead with your plans when you’re so worried.”

You: “Because I know some worry is normal. But worrying too much won’t help anyone.”

Then change the subject. Don’t allow the doubter to keep pushing your buttons.

As you’re getting ready to go back to work watch out for comments from friends that may be unintentionally insulting. As Vicky, a psychologist, explains, “My neighbor, who was my good friend, actually referred to herself, in contrast to me, as a ‘100 percent mother.’ I was really fried, but it would have sounded stupid to say, ‘I’m a 100 percent mother, too!’ And anyway, I could tell she was a little anxious that she wouldn’t have me to pal around with during the day anymore.” Vicky’s friend probably didn’t mean to be hurtful, but when a friend reacts badly to your return to work, it may be time to give the relationship a break until you are feeling more secure yourself.

Feel good about your return.

Truth be told, you may not regret the return to work that much; indeed, part of you may welcome it. You may look forward to getting dressed for work and stepping into a new environment. During your maternity leave you may have discovered that you missed your job, and you may now find yourself compartmentalizing home and work the way many fathers do.

“I knew I could walk back into an office and produce almost as though I’d

never left,” says Charlene, a bank manager. “I couldn’t wait to get my first paycheck. I was extremely sensitive about being dependent upon my husband for money.”

Suzie, a college professor, remembers, “I wanted to go back to work when my baby was an infant so that he’d grow up knowing Mommy and Daddy both work. I didn’t want to stay home with him for a long time and then make it hard for him when I left. I felt that as long as my son was taken care of by good people, he’d be fine.”

Sarah, an art director in an advertising agency, also had an easy adjustment. “I had a part-time job that I returned to a few weeks after my baby was born,” she says. “I loved being in the office, knowing I had a wonderful baby to go home to. At work I talked about art and advertising, not babies. I loved my work connection, my work ‘fix.’”

If you’ve arranged quality childcare, let yourself feel some relief about your return to work. “If I didn’t have a good babysitter,” says Marlena, a physical therapist, “I wouldn’t feel the ease of walking out the door. I once followed my babysitter to the park and watched her push my daughter in the baby swing. Both the sitter’s and my child’s enthusiasm were plain to see. Their relationship is wonderful. But no one will ever love our child the way my husband and I do.”

That’s right. But there are others who will love her quite a bit and take excellent care of her. Reassure yourself that your baby doesn’t need only you. You can go on with your working life as long as you fulfill your responsibilities as a mother.

To bolster your confidence about your decision, identify your supporters, and keep in touch with them as you ease your way back into work. Let them know how much you appreciate their encouragement.

“My mom, who hadn’t worked, supported my career all the way. She said that if I really wanted equality in my family, I had to contribute financially,” says Debra, a textbook editor.

“My mother-in-law didn’t think my job was a big deal because she had worked,” says Lily, who manages a sporting goods store. “She was very helpful – in a matter-of-fact way.”

Prepare for the first week.

The first few weeks after returning to work will be as hectic and confusing as were the first few weeks after the baby was born. Grandparents, other relatives, and friends who offered to help when you came home from the hospital may not realize that now is another good time to lend a hand. If you and your spouse feel the need, invite a willing volunteer to come for a week to pitch in with cooking and other household tasks. Make sure that the person is someone who is comfortable with your decision to return to work. If friends and neighbors ask what they can do, suggest bringing a meal.

If you haven't already planned how housework will be accomplished once you return to work, discuss this with your husband now. If you're feeling domestic, cook extra batches of food and freeze them for later. Otherwise, plan simple meals if you're the cook. Stock up on frozen foods and paper plates, anything to make the first few weeks easier.

Before you return to work, set up your baby's routines with the caregiver or daycare center. Start the routines a few days early to work out the bugs before you return to work.

If your baby will be cared for at home, go over your house with safety in mind. Get a smoke alarm and a fire extinguisher, if you don't already have them. Taking extra precautions in this way will alleviate your nervousness about leaving.

Take a trip to the office a week before you return – with your baby, if doing so is appropriate and won't undercut your professional standing in the eyes of your coworkers. Review what's been going on at the office with your supervisor. Ask for copies of memos to update you on current projects. If you haven't kept up with your mail or email, catch up now.

Talk to your supervisor about the exact day of your return. See if you can arrange to start on a Thursday instead of a Monday, so the first week won't be too long. Also discuss any arrangements you'd like to make to guarantee a comfortable fit between your work and home schedules. For example, to accommodate your breastfeeding, you may wish to come in an hour later and leave an hour later. You don't need to

explain why; just "It would help me if I could start at ten and leave at six."

If you're going to be expressing breast milk at work, think through the procedure before you first day back. Where will you do it? Working mothers have discovered various locations: a private office, a closet, a storeroom, the bathroom. Is there a refrigerator at work where you can store your breast milk, or will you have to bring an insulated thermos or cooler with you? Other mothers at work can help you with this. Don't discuss it with your boss if you think he or she will disapprove.

You're back!

Make your first day back at work special. Wear something comfortable that makes you feel attractive. Buy yourself flowers for your dinner table or desk, and perhaps arrange for a special meal when you get home, either by asking a friend or your husband to make it or by buying something easy to prepare.

Arrange a pleasant way to get to and from work. Perhaps leave your car home and arrange for someone to drive you in the first day. Or take a taxi instead of the bus. Pamper yourself, and

let yourself be helped.

"The first week I went back," says Margaret, a lawyer, "my husband and I rode the subway together. We usually leave at different times, but that first week we needed each other to ease our anxiety."

Take a picture of your baby to work with you, but if it bothers you too much, put it in the drawer for now. Soon you'll feel more comfortable looking at it.

Set up times during the day to telephone your caregiver. Explain that you won't always call so often. And of course, give her your number so she can call you, if necessary.

Seek the comfort of friends who are also working mothers to help you get through the day. Maybe make a lunch date with them. Then, if you need to cry, you can do so in the company of friends. Leaving the baby the first few times can be a wrenching experience.

Again, the first few weeks back at work can be tough. No matter how well you've planned, you may find the transition difficult – and lengthy. Give yourself the time you need to adjust. Don't exhaust yourself trying to prove



Be strategic at work, and reach out to coworkers you know will be empathetic and help to make the readjustment easier.

you can do it all. "The office I work in had never had a working mother executive," says Pauline, an investment counselor. "I imagined that I wouldn't be given certain assignments because I was a mother, so I tried to overcompensate by working extra hard. Still, I had to leave rather early. I worried that people were watching when I ran to catch the train at five-thirty. I was a physical and emotional wreck."

Gradually Pauline learned to balance her devotion to her career and her devotion to her family. As she puts it, "These two parts of my life got balanced when I compromised. I accepted that I couldn't do everything I wanted to do to be number one in my firm. At least I couldn't do it then, when my baby was young."

"The hardest thing for me," says Allison, a teacher, "was leaving my baby and not knowing what he was doing. Also, since I was tired, it was hard to face a classroom of children each morning."

"Nights out with clients were insufferable," says Pauline. "I always wanted to be home at a reasonable hour to be with my baby."

"I found it hard to leave my baby with daycare workers, even though I knew they were very capable," says Marge, a stage designer. "My husband was great, though. He helped me with everything."

Pauline's husband helped, too. And Allison's mother made her supper every night for two weeks straight. Such support helped these women get through the transition period.

Expect the unexpected.

However you feel about going back to work, you may be surprised by the actual outcome. Leave yourself open to such surprises.

"My coworkers threw a surprise shower for me during our lunch hour the day I went back to work," says Maria, a factory worker. "They gave me breast pads, baby clothes, and a beautiful framed picture of my baby to hang in the lunchroom. We all sat there and cried. It was wonderful."

Polly, a social worker, brought her baby with her to work and found her coworkers more flexible and understanding than she had ever imagined. They knew she had conflicts about

Entering The Homestretch

The last month of your maternity leave will be filled with many important things to do, from making childcare arrangements to deciding whether or not to continue breastfeeding. Use the timetable provided here to ensure that your transition back to work will be a smooth one for you and your baby.

Last month at home

- ◆ Begin search for childcare.
- ◆ If you are planning to wean your baby, introduce bottle feedings into his routine.

Last week at home

- ◆ Establish a routine with your caregiver. If you will be using daycare, visit the center or caregiver's home with your baby. Plan to spend a few hours there at least twice that week. If the caregiver will come to your home, arrange for her to begin work a few days before your maternity leave ends.
- ◆ Visit your workplace. Ask coworkers to update you on current projects. If you plan to continue breastfeeding, determine where you will express milk and store it.
- ◆ Arrange for a supportive person (parent, in-law, sibling, or friend) to spend a few evenings in your home during your first week back at work to assist with household tasks and cooking.

First day back at work

- ◆ Try to start midweek.
- ◆ Make your first day at work special. Buy yourself a small present or flowers for your desk. Bring a picture of your baby with you to work to show coworkers.
- ◆ Arrange to have lunch with a supportive friend or coworker.
- ◆ To help alleviate your anxiety, ask your caregiver to call you regularly with updates about your baby's day.

working, but as a single parent, she needed the income.

"My coworkers actually helped me become a parent," says Polly. "My daughter and I didn't have involved, nurturing relatives to help us, yet we needed to be surrounded by loving, caring people. My colleagues were so helpful and considerate that it seemed as if my daughter and I were going back and forth not between home and work but between two loving environments."

Allison was surprised to find that after she had her baby she was a much better teacher. After the difficulties of the transition were smoothed out, she was more relaxed in the classroom and had a different perspective on children in general.

Of course, some days will be more taxing than others. "I thought I had everything worked out," says Mary, a medical secretary. "The babysitter lived close to the office, so I could go to her house to feed the baby at lunchtime and get to him quickly when work was over. However, one day after work my car wouldn't start. I didn't know what to do. My breasts were leaking through my clothes, and I knew my baby was crying from hunger. Finally a nurse brought me to the babysitter's, and my father-in-law picked me up. When it was over, I was glad I could laugh about it. I think keeping a sense of humor is critical to getting through those early days."

Mary's right: A sense of humor can get you through these trying times until you, your family, and your caregiver settle into a smooth schedule. When the going gets rough, keep in mind that others have come through this stressful period successfully and now have both prosperous careers and happy families.

Jean Marzollo is the author of *Your Maternity Leave: How to Leave Work, Have a Baby, and Go Back to Work Without Getting Lost, Trapped, or Sandbagged Along the Way* (Poseidon Press, October 1989), from which this article has been adapted.